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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL PRICE'S 5/28-29/07
LEGISLATIVE STRENGTHENING TRIP TO LEBANON

¶1. (SBU) The House Democracy Assistance Commission last hosted Lebanese members of parliament (MPs) for a legislative strengthening visit to Washington in April. Then, as now, Lebanon was in deep crisis. Your visit comes amidst heightened tensions and renewed security concerns that will likely continue until the international tribunal to try suspects in the 2005 Hariri assassination is established, and a new president is elected. The clashes one week before your visit between the terrorist group Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as well as a series of bombings in civilian neighborhoods have created an atmosphere of intimidation. Yet the impact of today's crisis -- when Syria's allies seek to paralyze and make irrelevant the cabinet and the parliament and then install a pro-Syrian president in autumn -- stands in sharp contrast to the July 2006 crisis, when Hizballah dragged Lebanon into war with Israel. Then, facing bombs and the massive internal displacement of civilians, the Lebanese rallied around the Prime Minister and the institutions of the cabinet and the parliament. Today, the Lebanese are divided, with the government portrayed by Hizballah, Michel Aoun, and their partners as a U.S.-directed puppet.

¶2. (SBU) Also worrying, a growing number of those once identified with the pro-democracy March 14 bloc -- and who still sympathize with the movement's principles of freedom, sovereignty, and democracy -- are "tuning out" in disgust at the political stalemate and increasing security problems. Even March 14 activists worry that the USG and others are losing interest in Lebanon and favor re-engagement with Syria, due to larger, regional considerations.

¶3. (SBU) Thus, we welcome your visit as an opportunity to promote several goals:

-- Strengthen the institution of the parliament and encourage March 14 MPs to work together on a cohesive agenda to reinforce the position of the government against the opposition.

-- Shore up the ranks of the March 14 movement by showing that U.S. and international support for Lebanon remains unshakable and non-negotiable.

-- Inspire those becoming disillusioned with politics by reminding them that the upcoming presidential election is a remarkable opportunity for ensuring that Lebanon's future remains in the hands of the Lebanese.

-- Reassure all Lebanese that the United States supports a prosperous, democratic, united, sovereign Lebanon with strong

institutions and at peace with its neighbors; and underscore that we are not seeking to isolate or disenfranchise any of Lebanon's communities.

OPPOSITION TO SINIORA

14. (SBU) The support that PM Siniora once enjoyed has been eroded by the opposition, but Siniora has been resolute, notwithstanding an assault that includes the walk-out of Syria-aligned ministers and the assassination of Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel in November, a sit-in outside Siniora's offices beginning in December, violent street demonstrations in January, commuter bus bombings in February, car bombs in civilian areas in May, and the insistence by pro-Syrians that the Siniora cabinet is null and void. But while still in office, the PM and his cabinet are decidedly weakened (as, arguably, are those who tried but failed to remove him) and find it increasingly hard to take, implement, or enforce decisions. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri has refused to convene the Parliament throughout its current session, which was to have begun in mid-March and run through May 31. As a result, no legislation has been adopted. For a while, it looked as though the two sides -- March 8-Aoun and March 14-GOL -- had exhausted themselves into a draw. However, over the past month rhetoric against Siniora and bombings in civilian areas escalated sharply, suggesting that pro-Syrians have entered a dangerous new phase meant to call into question international support for UN Security Council passage of the international tribunal under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. We expect a possible UNSC vote on the international tribunal the week of May 28, and the imminence of this action has sent Syria's sympathizers into action.

BEIRUT 00000740 002 OF 004

PALESTINIAN CAMPS

15. (SBU) The opposition may repeat the charge that the USG is working to "implant" permanently into Lebanon the largely Sunni Palestinian refugee population, thus giving the Sunnis a surge of demographic power at the expense of the Christians and Shia. To avoid giving fodder to those who use this issue politically against us, when the question of the "right of Palestinian return" is raised -- as it often is -- we state simply that, once the question of Palestinian refugees can be addressed, certainly Lebanon's special needs and concerns will be taken into account.

CABINET CRISIS UNRESOLVED

16. (SBU) While the UNSC underscored recently that the Siniora cabinet is the legitimate government of Lebanon, the lack of Shia representation, a gap created by the Shia ministers themselves in their resignation from the Cabinet, still creates problems in sectarian-sensitive Lebanon. The demand for a National Unity Cabinet that would include Christian opposition leader General Michel Aoun and give a blocking minority to Hizballah and its allies, is the ostensible justification for the anti-Siniora protests. The PM and others propose various solutions. Siniora offers a 17-13 cabinet based on a new agreed cabinet agenda; some speculate that the resigned ministers will return to work as caretakers; others favor a technocratic cabinet until presidential elections. We do not believe that either bloc is serious about fixing the cabinet before having more clarity regarding presidential elections. In the meantime, President Lahoud maintains that the cabinet has ceased to exist, leading to fears that he will appoint a competing Prime Minister, creating a "two government" scenario akin to the disastrous 1988-1990 period. We see increasing evidence that the "two government" scenario is, indeed, what the pro-Syrians intend to create.

PARLIAMENT CLOSED,
BUT NOT INACTIVE

¶7. (SBU) Speaker Berri has refused to open a formal parliamentary session despite weekly protests by March 14 MPs; Berri argues that the parliament cannot refer laws to an unconstitutional cabinet. Some parliamentary committees continue to meet to discuss draft legislation and initiatives with "resigned" and acting ministers. Your visit will be an apt reminder to Berri that he has a constitutional as well as a personal role to play in resolving the political stalemate, while your legislative strengthening mission will help bolster an institution that has eroded to the detriment of the nation. Parliamentary effort will be an essential part of any enduring political resolution; key laws on economic and political reform are awaiting parliamentary review and action. These issues were raised by Speaker Pelosi when she led a House delegation to Beirut on April 2, which included meetings with PM Siniora and Speaker Nabih Berri.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

¶8. (SBU) With no other easy resolution in sight, the Lebanese have focused on the November 24 expiration of Lahoud's extended term as the opportunity to solve this crisis or, alternatively, as the time Lebanon will descend definitively into chaos. Unless assured they approve the choice, the pro-Syrians and Aoun threaten to boycott the parliament session that will elect Lahoud's successor. While the March 14 majority could elect a new president despite a boycott, that president would suffer problems of legitimacy due to quorum questions and to a possible lack of Shia participation in the voting. This, too, could lead to a "two government" crisis, with the March 8-Aoun bloc following a Lahoud-appointed cabinet, and uncertainty over how the army would react.

HIZBALLAH'S ARMS

¶9. (SBU) Given the focus on the international tribunal, cabinet crisis, and presidential elections, little has happened practically to restrict Hizballah's arms. We await

BEIRUT 00000740 003 OF 004

the arrival of a UN team to look at the Syrian-Lebanese border soon, with a view toward developing future efforts to stem arms smuggling to Hizballah from Syria. Arms smuggling continues, and there is widespread public speculation that Iranian-funded land purchases are linking the Hizballah-controlled areas in the south to Hizballah-controlled parts of the Biqa' Valley. While there have been a few "good news" stories (including the Lebanese army seizure of weapons claimed by Hizballah), the GOL has not undertaken any serious, sustained efforts to control Hizballah's arms. This is another reason why the presidency is so important: the cabinet could more easily take meaningful steps, if the president is on the side of the state.

SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

¶10. (SBU) Not unreasonably, Siniora and others are obsessed with security concerns: you will note that most people whom we visit, fearful of assassination, are holed up in fortified compounds, and those political figures outside the Embassy are accompanied by bodyguards. The clashes this past week between the army and the terrorist group Fatah al-Islam in Tripoli and the Nahr el-Barad Palestinian refugee camp, stand as the worst internal fighting in Lebanon since the 1975-90 civil war. The series of bombings in Beirut and Mount Lebanon (in a Christian neighborhood, a Sunni neighborhood, and most recently in a mixed Druze- Christian area) are

similar to a series of bombings in the spring of 2005, meant to intimidate rather than to produce mass casualties. In both cases, we -- along with most Lebanese -- suspect Syria or its Lebanese sympathizers of trying to foment instability and opposition to the establishment of an international tribunal.

YOUR MEETINGS

¶11. (SBU) Your meetings will include March 14 leaders Saad Hariri and Fouad Siniora, with their agenda that overlaps our own regarding Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, as well as a variety of parliamentarians from across the political and confessional spectrum. Lest we be accused of not listening to the other side, we have arranged for those sympathetic to General Aoun to see you and for you to meet with Parliament Speaker Berri (a meeting that also helps check the Shia confessional box). Finally, we have arranged for you to meet with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, a senior powerbroker in the divided Christian community.

¶12. (SBU) In terms of points to make in the major meetings, for Siniora, the agenda is obvious: gaining control over Fatah al-Islam and stemming violence in the Palestinian camps, winning UNSC approval of the tribunal, solving the cabinet crisis, stopping arms smuggling, and holding upcoming presidential elections. Siniora will bring up Sheba'a Farms and his view about an appropriate response to the Arab peace initiative.

¶13. (SBU) With Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, we suggest focusing on the need for Berri to open parliament before the expiration on May 31 of the ordinary season. This will build on the demands of the Lebanese themselves. We guess that Berri does not want to lose the international connections and legitimacy that accrue to him due to his position, and we suggest you emphasize to Berri the need for him to think of his responsibilities and his legacy. Berri will want a signal from us that we are not going to impose our own presidential candidate. We recommend underscoring how important it is for his bloc to show up for the presidential elections rather than try to defeat the democratic choice by using the quorum tool as a veto.

¶14. (SBU) Maronite Patriarch Sfeir's surprise 5/11 visit to President Lahoud suggests that the Patriarch may have been sparked to activism either by belated desperation caused by the seriousness of Lebanon's political crisis or by a stern warning from the Vatican. While he will not choose a candidate for fear of splitting his own community, we should encourage him to make clear what qualities are needed in a new president. We also suggest reinforcing to him the serious danger Michel Aoun's alliance with Hizballah poses for his relationship with us and thus for the future of Lebanon's Christians.

BEIRUT 00000740 004 OF 004

¶15. (SBU) Your meeting with Aoun's advisors (the General himself will be in Paris for a book signing) is a chance for you to deliver the message that the appeasement of Syria and Hizballah during a time of crisis for the GOL is unacceptable. We have noted that such an approach will naturally limit our enthusiasm for cooperation with Aoun. We should caution Aoun's followers of the cost to their reputations and relations with us of taking steps such as boycotting a parliamentary session to elect the president or of backing a Lahoud-appointed faux cabinet.

¶16. (SBU) We need to push March 14 figures -- Hariri and the parliamentarians -- to come up with a compelling message to the Lebanese about why the Lebanese should continue to support the March 14 bloc: what is the vision of Lebanon's future that March 14 can offer?

FELTMAN